

Give up or give 5 minutes

Devoting a little quality time to talking about HIV/Aids in assembly can make a big difference, writes **Joan Dommissie**



Assembly is not necessarily the highlight of your week as a learner or teacher, but it is an honoured practice in South African schools.

One of the most memorable of the countless assemblies I have attended took place early one morning under the trees at Jabulani Technical in Soweto.

When the learners sang the required hymn it was a practised performance that left me shivering with emotion. The experience reminded me that assemblies do not need to be a trial or a platform for a string of complaints; they can be an inspiring start to the day.

This year, I have been allocated five minutes of assembly time at Kensington Secondary, east of Johannesburg, to speak about HIV/Aids. Another two local high schools have also come on board.

What I believe would work throughout South Africa is just this five-minute weekly session. Each member of staff could have a turn at sharing the task, and the learners will have ongoing and valuable input.

The good news about this plan is that you are able to reach each learner in the school. The limited time available will require you to be both succinct and effective.

There are countless approaches that can be used, depending on your own area of expertise. For instance, educators may decide to involve learners with specific talents, for instance, speaking, musical, acting or debating, to get the attention of their captive audience.

We know learners do not want to hear another ABC lecture. They need new insights and relevant information. I find newspapers and the internet good sources of material. If you preach abstinence (from sex), or criticise the behaviour of learners, you will get nowhere – but if young people decide to abstain or use condoms because of what you imparted, you have made a break-

Advice from young fathers

... to other young men on how not to become a father too soon

- Avoid having **multiple sexual partners**
- Abstinence is better but condoms help **prevent pregnancy**
- Don't mix **sex with drugs or alcohol**
- Wait until you've **finished school** and have found a job before fathering a child

... to other young fathers

- **Maintain a relationship** with the child's mother and her family
- **Tell your parents**
- Prepare for the child and **give it love**
- **Don't leave school**
- **Get a job** when you have completed your education
- **Don't deny or abandon** the child
- **Don't panic**
- **Don't make the same mistake again**



Graphic: JOHN McCANN Source: TEENAGE DATA 2009 HSRC

through. It may be a good idea to bounce your ideas off colleagues before you begin.

This week, black learners complained to me that their parents did not speak to them about sexual issues whereas their white counterparts enjoy open communication with their parents and that is why they are less likely to practise unsafe sex. Here, educators may have to step in where parents have failed.

You may find the following ideas useful to kick-start your school HIV programme. The first was based on

the 2009 matric results. It dealt with a number of high achievers who excelled against all odds, but included the story of a girl who committed suicide when she could not find her name listed in the newspaper.

I hardly mentioned HIV in this five-minute slot, based on the premise that, if learners realise that success depends on consistent hard work, they are less likely to give up on themselves or engage in unsafe sex.

A subsequent talk was about the importance of the role of a father in a child's life. My thrust was that a

schoolboy or girl is ill-fitted for parenthood. A child born to schoolgoing parents is likely to face a life of poverty and deprivation. My source was an article in *Uncut* (Nov/Dec 2009). It is an excellent and inspiring piece based on a Human Sciences Research Council study of 27 young fathers aged between 14 and 20.

The material outlined the struggle young men face when they became fathers. I called four boys up on to the stage at Athlone Boys High in Johannesburg – two 14-year-olds and two seniors. The younger boys were particularly short and childlike and the older ones towered over them. It came as a shock to all of us to think that boys as young as 14 already become sexually active and run the risk of fathering a child.

Although we laughed together, there was also the recognition of the risks young people run.

A LoveLife article included addenda entitled: "Advice from young fathers to young men to avoid becoming fathers" and "Advice from young fathers to young fathers". I read the lists aloud and the boys paid close attention (See graphic).

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